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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the educational needs of children who speak English as a Second Language (ESL) and considers the issues that are critical to providing these children with beneficial classroom environments, focusing on the effective instruction of bilingual children who are placed in classrooms with monolingual teachers and monolingual instruction. Eight specific points address such concerns as use of the first language; first language and parent influence; cognitive abilities; the relationship between reading, listening, and speaking; situational impact; sources of learning difficulties; and assessment concerns. It is suggested that when teachers understand the role of the first language in literacy learning and build on it as a foundation for the development of English literacy, children who speak English as a second language experience greater success in school. (Contains 37 notes.) (NAV)

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Teaching Literacy to Bilingual Children: Effective Practices for Use by Monolingual and Bilingual Teachers

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In schools throughout the United States, the number of children who speak English as a second language is rising sharply. While the student population in kindergarten through grade 12 increased between the years 1985-1991 by only 4.5%, the enrollment of bilingual students has increased by 51.3% during the same time period.[1] In many cases, bilingual children and students with limited English proficiency are not instructed in bilingual settings. Rather, for a variety of reasons, they find themselves placed in classrooms with monolingual teachers and monolingual instruction. It was recently reported that 50% of all students who have been labeled limited-English-proficient are in classrooms where no special services are provided for them.[2] Unfortunately, many of the teachers these children depend on to learn have had little background in teaching bilingual children and are unfamiliar with issues of bilingualism and biliteracy.

In this paper, we address the educational needs of children who speak English as a second language and consider the issues that are critical in providing these children beneficial classroom environments. While the particular focus of this paper is effective instruction of bilingual children who are placed in classrooms with monolingual teachers, it is important to note at the outset that we affirm the importance of bilingual programs for students who cannot yet perform ordinary class work in English, and that we do not advocate the premature exit of children out of bilingual education programs, or the denial of the need for bilingual programs altogether. Throughout the paper, we use the terms "bilingual children," "bilingual learners," and "bilingual students" to refer to any children whose first language is not English, regardless of their level of fluency in either language, and whether or not they are currently enrolled in bilingual education programs.

We hope the information presented in this paper will provide a starting point for those who are just now beginning to explore issues of bilingualism and biliteracy and an effective summary for those who are more knowledgeable.

1. Children who are bilingual and biliterate demonstrate enhanced cognitive abilities in some areas.

Since the beginning of this century, various studies have investigated the relationship between intelligence and bilingualism. Early studies tied the poor performance of immigrant children to a "language handicap" that was presumed to result from exposure to two languages.[3] Recent research with bilinguals in the United States and elsewhere has not only soundly disproved the cognitive deficit myth, but has also provided evidence that there are cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism and biliteracy. For example, studies suggest that when compared with monolinguals, bilingual individuals have greater mental flexibility,[4] greater metalinguistic awareness,[5] and more complex analytical strategies in their approach to language operations.[6] Cognitive benefits are most likely to develop in situations in which both the first language and English have perceived social and economic value.[7] The cognitive advantages emerge when both languages are strong.

In schools and classrooms where this evidence is used to shape instructional programs, the following characteristics and practices are often observed:

- Native languages are valued socially and academically in the classroom and school communities. This is evident in multilingual displays throughout the school, including, for example, multilingual posters, bulletin boards, notices, and books.

- Students are encouraged to use their first languages at home and at school to support the development of English.

- Literacy is developed and maintained in both the first language and also in English.

2. Knowing how to read and write in the first language supports the development of reading and writing in English.

There is extensive research with learners of English as a second language to document the correlation between levels of native language literacy and acquisition and development of English literacy.[8] Programs which provide students opportunities to develop and refine their first language literacy skills also build a foundation for success in second language literacy. As students gain increased knowledge of English and it becomes more automatic, they also become more efficient in applying first language literacy strategies.[9] It is particularly interesting to note that this holds true even when languages have different writing systems.[10]

When the development of the native language is neglected in favor of instruction in English, the native language ceases to have a positive influence on the process of English literacy and language learning. Further, researchers note that students who have not had the opportunity to develop literacy in their first language often experience learning problems similar to students who have been described as "slow learners."[11] Researchers conclude that developing and reinforcing both the first language and English establishes a strong foundation for English literacy and may prevent the occurrence of learning difficulties.

In English-speaking classrooms where these principles are implemented, the following practices are often observed:

- The use of the native language is encouraged and allowed regardless of the ability level in English. Native language use does not replace English, but serves as a bridge to its development.

- Reading, writing, and speaking activities focus on developing higher order thinking skills as well as "basic" skills.

- Cooperative grouping is a frequent organizational practice. Collaboration permits students with varying levels of literacy and language proficiency to both gain from and contribute to each other's learning.

- The classroom library contains books in the first languages of the children as well as in English.

- Support is secured from three bilingual resources: parents, bilingual teachers and older bilingual students. Parents read and write with their children in the native language and in English, if they are fluent. They monitor completion of homework tasks and encourage discussion of events at school. Bilingual teachers share their expertise and their resources to support students and teachers in monolingual classrooms. Older and younger students who speak the same language join together in cross-age pairs to complete literacy-related projects and activities. Parents and bilingual teachers may also assist in identifying and securing appropriate first language materials for English-speaking classrooms.

- Literacy portfolios include entries in both languages. Students' literacy ability is evaluated as a composite of their performances in one or both languages.

3. When students are allowed to use their first language, performance in reading and writing in English is enhanced, particularly in the development of concept knowledge and critical thinking.

Four major variables influence students' tendency to use the first language: English proficiency; personality; topic familiarity; and beliefs about second language methodology.[12] Students who are just beginning to acquire English are likely to profit most from using their first language. As students develop fluency and confidence, they typically use more and more English. There are some exceptions to this: beginners who are more "daring" and generally greater risk-takers in the use of English may choose to use their first language less than older or more self-conscious learners.

With regard to topic familiarity, evidence suggests that when the topic is one that students have experienced in their native language and culture, they are better able to develop their ideas in the native language in preparation for writing or sharing their ideas in English. On the other hand, if the topic is familiar to students only in an American context, and students have little or no basis for understanding the ideas in their first language, they are likely to find it easier to share their ideas orally or in writing in English.[13]

Because of the variety of factors involved, flexibility is recommended in the use of the native language. Its use should be neither required nor forbidden. Even in cases where the classroom teacher does not speak the child's first language, allowing students to use their first language has proven effective.[14] In such circumstances, however, it is important that there is trust and respect between the teacher and students.

In classrooms where the native language is used to support the development of reading and writing, the following practices are often observed:

- Students may work by themselves or with peers who share the same native language and use the first language to explore and relate background knowledge and to share their understanding of and response to the text.[15]

- Students may respond to literature through journal-writing and other activities in the native language. This practice allows students to focus attention on comprehension of the selection, rather than on production in English. It provides teachers with a clearer picture of students' comprehension.[16] In cases where teaches do not speak the child's first language, they might seek assistance from a bilingual teacher or an older student in translating the child's written work.

- Throughout each of the stages of writing process, students are encouraged to use the native language: for discussing ideas and planning;[17] for translating key words to "get a stronger impression and association of ideas;"[18] and for composing the first draft.

- While reading in English, students may simultaneously listen to the text in the first language. Referred to as "reverse subtitles," this practice is similar to the experience of watching a foreign film where viewers receive the text orally in the second language and visually in the first language. In the case of reading, students receive the print visually in the second language, and orally in the first language. Studies suggest that this practice enhances students' comprehension of the English text.[19]

4. **In learning English as a second language, writing develops alongside reading, listening and speaking.**

Evidence suggests that bilingual children develop literacy skills in the same ways as native speakers. Therefore, they, too, benefit from having role models who demonstrate and value writing, as well as from having room to experiment with language in an environment in which they are encouraged to take risks and practice writing.[20] Just as native English speakers are encouraged to experiment with writing at very early ages, bilingual children should be encouraged and given opportunities to write in the earliest stages of English acquisition and development.[21] The frequently-observed practice of delaying or controlling writing instruction until students can speak English proficiently may actually inhibit literacy learning for bilingual learners.[22] Examination of the writing of bilingual learners shows that these students readily apply what they know about writing in their native language and make use of their knowledge of the systems of English to hypothesize about writing in English. As they learn more about the written code of English, their growing control of the language is reflected in their writing.[23] In classrooms where these principles are implemented, the following practices are often observed:

- Students have daily opportunities to read and write meaningful text in either or both languages.
- Early writing attempts, such as drawing pictures, copying labels or phrases from around the classroom, and approximated spellings are evident in the students' writing folders.
- Students engage in draft writing and have varied opportunities such as mini-lessons or writing conferences with the teacher and/or peers to talk about their writing and to develop the strategies and skills of the writing process.
- Students have regular opportunities to share their writing orally or in the form of published books on display in the classroom.

5. **Authentic situations facilitate writing development in both first and second languages. Authentic situations are defined as those that offer students opportunities to use writing in ways that are meaningful and purposeful to them.**

Several researchers and theorists have examined contexts that promote writing development of second language learners and have concluded that the most effective environments are those that offer frequent opportunities for students to use writing to communicate meaningfully and purposefully.[24] In such contexts, writing is treated as an act of communication rather than as an opportunity to acquire and practice the forms of language. Studies indicate that when writing is taught within meaningful contexts, even students just beginning to learn English can express themselves effectively in writing.[25] The mechanics of language are not ignored in such circumstances; rather, the teacher uses the writing sample that the student has drafted to demonstrate the purpose and use of the conventions of written English.

In addition, when writing is integrated throughout the curriculum, children have opportunities to become familiar with diverse genres. The creation of different texts for different purposes contributes to the child's developing understanding of language and literacy.[26] For example, letter writing may follow a field trip experience, thanking the hosts of the event; report writing often emerges from a unit of study in social studies or science; biography writing may grow out of an author study in the literature class.

In classrooms where these principles are implemented, the following practices are often observed:

- Students engage in interactive dialogue writing with each other and with their teacher.
- Students engage in writing across the curriculum and for a variety of purposes, for example, composing a shopping list for a cooking activity, a letter or thank-you-note related to a school event, a response to a book, or written directions for a school visitor.
- Writing folders include samples of students' work in various stages of the writing process, including first drafts, pieces that have been revised and edited, and pieces that have been published.
- In pairs or in small groups, students engage in conferences about their writing.
- Students use the computer to compose writing drafts, write letters to their pen pals or to publish a classroom newspaper.
- Classroom displays of published pieces include books published in students' first languages as well as in English.
- The classroom lending library contains student-authored books in students' first languages as well as in English.

6. **Bilingualism does not explain the underachievement of language minority students. It is important that teachers and specialists search for underlying causes of learning difficulty, including educational, cognitive, linguistic, sociopolitical, and affective factors.**

Throughout the United States, there is alarming evidence of the over-identification of linguistically and culturally-diverse children as learning disabled.[27] The misidentification is believed to occur for several reasons,[28] including a climate of racial and cultural prejudice and a lack of cultural congruity in curriculum and instruction. Of particular concern, however, is the widespread belief that bilingual children who experience learning difficulties are disadvantaged by bilingualism, itself. That is, teachers and specialists sometimes conclude that bilingualism "confuses" or interferes with students' academic success. This assumption has been refuted by several studies which provide evidence that there are, in fact, cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism.[29]

When bilingual students experience difficulty learning to read and write, it is critical that teachers and specialists explore the full range of possible reasons underlying the difficulty, beginning first with an examination of the appropriateness of instruction, itself, as well as the possibility of speech and language deficits in both languages, hearing impairment, visual impairment or psychological and emotional difficulties.

In classrooms where these principles are implemented, the following practices are often observed:

- In order to obtain valid and trustworthy results, assessment is conducted in both the native language and English, since any underlying learning difficulties would be evident in both languages. Identification of a particular weakness in English only suggests that the difficulty is related to language knowledge rather than a cognitive deficit.
- Assessment is conducted in contexts and situations that are familiar to the student and that represent typical classroom tasks and situations.

- In addition to assessing factors within the student, assessment also includes an evaluation of the quality of instruction that the child has been offered and the opportunities for learning that have been provided to the student.

7. **Any form of assessment of bilingual children experiencing learning difficulties will be more valid if it includes an evaluation of literacy performance in both the native language and in English. A composite of strengths in both languages will provide the most accurate representation of the student's current level of intellectual functioning and potential for learning.**

Research on assessment of bilingual students is still in its infancy, and experts are only now beginning to understand the complexities of displaying and documenting literacy knowledge of bilingual learners. Even at this early stage, however, there are some points that have become quite clear. First, there is widespread agreement that the language proficiency demonstrated in face-to-face communication differs from the proficiency required in many test contexts.[30] Thus, when students are confronted with an assessment of literacy in English only, their performance may be a measure of their linguistic competence rather than their literacy knowledge.[31] Second, the nature of the assessment task, itself, may lead to misrepresentation of students' cognitive and literacy abilities. To perform as expected on assessment tasks, students "have to first understand the social and cultural context of assessment situations, the modes of thinking expected, and the ways in which language is used in an assessment context."[32] Third, English literacy tests are often dominated by content that reflects the prior learning experiences of mainstream children and excludes the learning experiences of those who have grown up in a different cultural and linguistic environment.[33] In this case, performance may be more dependent on background knowledge and experience than on reading comprehension strategies.

In classrooms where this evidence is acknowledged, the following practices are often observed:

- Assessment tasks are familiar to students, emerging from routine literacy experiences.
- Assessment tasks are completed in both the first language and in English, providing students the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and concepts in either language.
- Assessment tasks are conducted using text that represents the culture and experiences of the student.
- Assessment occurs repeatedly across settings and contexts, permitting students to demonstrate the full range of literacy strategies that they possess. For example, students may be asked to read and respond orally, in writing, or in collaboration with another student. As well, students are asked to read and respond across different curricular areas, including mathematics, social studies, science and literature, permitting them to build on their strengths in different disciplines and domains to display their literacy knowledge.

8. Regardless of levels of literacy and language proficiency, parents effectively support their children's literacy learning in many different ways.

In many schools, parents' level of interest and participation in their child's academic success is measured by attendance and participation in school-based functions and events. Yet, parents who are linguistically and culturally-different from the school community are often unfamiliar with or intimidated by such events, and as a result, they often have low rates of attendance and participation. The narrow definition of parental involvement as participation in the school building has led many teachers and administrators to believe that parents are not interested in and unconcerned about their children's school learning. Studies, however, disprove this belief. Evidence indicates that, regardless of levels of literacy and language proficiency in English, parents care deeply about their children's success in school, and, given a collaborative environment with the school, effectively support their children at home in many different ways.[34] For example, they instill high aspirations for education and a sense of family pride and honor,[35] and they create conducive learning environments at home through regular supervision of homework, reading in the home language, or telling stories that relate cultural traditions and values.[36] They also attempt to influence children's behavior and performance in school, reminding them to "pay attention, study hard and learn everything possible."[37]

Practices that are recommended to help parents, regardless of their levels of literacy or language proficiency in English, to support their children's academic success include:

- Implementation of systematic and routine homework schedules that enable parents to know what to expect of children on a daily basis and how to monitor their children's completion of assignments.

- Publication of a multilingual school newsletter which provides suggestions for ways parents can support their children's development of reading and writing at home and in school. It is beneficial to explain not just what parents might do (for example, read to children), but also, to describe procedures that are particularly helpful (for example, suggest three or four key strategies and some recommended books).

- Preparation of school messages in the first languages of the parents. In addition, encourage children who are able to read the messages with their parents, explaining the nature and purpose of school events.

- Encouraging children to accompany their parents to school meetings, giving them a tour of the school and introducing them to their teachers and friends.

- Inviting parents to participate in classroom activities, sharing information about their family life and traditions or providing demonstrations of culturally-important arts and crafts

- Encouraging parents to nurture oral and written uses of the native language at home

Summary

A review of current research on bilingualism and biliteracy suggests that when teachers understand the role of the first language in literacy learning and build on it as a foundation for the development of English literacy, children who speak English as a second language experience greater success in school. The Massachusetts Reading Association and the Massachusetts Association for Bilingual Education hope that this paper, in combination with the references that follow, provide administrators and teachers information that will help them to meet the diverse needs of the children in the classrooms of today and the classrooms of tomorrow.

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